

# ESCHATOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

## PART 4

### HERMENEUTICS, PART 4

In terms of hermeneutics, we have thus far dealt with amillennialism. What about postmillennialism? In general terms, postmillennialism claims that Christians will evangelize a large percentage of the world's population and after the world is largely populated with believers only then will the Lord return to planet earth. What we will come to understand is that postmillennial exegetes use the same hermeneutical techniques the amillennialists use. The question we want to answer then is how can they use the same hermeneutics and arrive at such vastly different understandings of the Scriptures? The reason is quite simple. When the exegetical standard for interpreting Scripture is first of all the theology of the exegete, and secondly the mind and imagination of the interpreter, then any interpretive result is made possible because the Word of God means what the human being interpreting it wants it to mean. Just because these theologians claim to be correctly interpreting the Bible doesn't make their claim true. When the Scriptures are allowed to be the control on our exegetical conclusions, then consistency in the interpretive effort is made possible.

Let's examine the exegetical presuppositions of a postmillennial authority named Keith A. Mathison who wrote a book entitled *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope*. His hermeneutical presuppositions will sound familiar because they are not all that different from amillennial presuppositions. History and tradition are very important considerations in this scheme and so is theology. Here are some quotes from his book.

"The proper interpretation of Scripture also requires a correct understanding of the role of tradition and community. This simply means that interpretation cannot be done in isolation from the church as the body of Christ. [When this man talks about the church as community and the body of Christ, he is talking about churches that hold to Reformed theology.] God has been giving the church gifted teachers and interpreters for two thousand years, and it is sheer folly to ignore their testimony. The typical evangelical understanding of the relationship between tradition and biblical interpretation is far removed from the understanding of the orthodox Reformers and the church fathers.

The magisterial Reformers, such as Luther and Calvin, did not reject tradition outright. They rejected the late medieval understanding of tradition.... They wanted to return to an earlier view, which understood tradition to be the traditional interpretation of Scripture....

In order to understand and interpret Scripture rightly, we must utilize the gifts that God has given the church, both today and throughout history. We ignore the insights of those who have gone before us at our own peril. This means that we interpret Scripture with the boundaries of the universally accepted ecumenical creeds of the church....

This small volume is written by one who stands unashamed within the Reformed tradition. This means that the great confessions and creeds of the Reformed churches are the framework and boundaries with which this work stands. It is the conviction of this author that the Westminster confession of Faith is an accurate and faithful summary of the teaching of Scripture.... Foundational for this book, providing the vantage point from which we shall proceed, are the Scriptures as the sole source of doctrine, as interpreted by the ecumenical creeds and the Reformed faith. [Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope*, pp. 7-8].

We might expect to discover that literal hermeneutics became the standard operating procedure for theologians after the Reformation, but we would be mistaken. Pentecost notes, "the history of interpretation reveals such an adherence to creeds and church interpretations that there is little progress in sound Scriptural interpretation in this period [meaning the post-Reformation period]." [J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 31]. As the example of Mathison we just read illustrates, this is still a problem in the modern church.

There is nothing in this that sounds any different from amillennial hermeneutics. It is quite telling that the hermeneutics used by amillennialists and postmillennialists are essentially the same system of hermeneutics, yet they result in interpretive conclusions that are opposites. There is something wrong with a hermeneutical system that performs that way. The reliance on history and on the creeds is a faulty basis for investigating Eschatology. Neither Luther nor Calvin could completely leave behind their Roman Catholic theological backgrounds that were sourced in Augustine and through him the Roman Church. It is very alarming that he admits his hermeneutic is the Scriptures but only as interpreted by "the ecumenical creeds and the Reformed faith." Whatever happened to the Christian faith? Being Reformed isn't faith; its' theology but that theology is the basis for this man's hermeneutics. Literal hermeneutics are soundly rejected. He does admit the "eschatological position of the leading Reformers remained generally Augustinian." [p. 37]. He also says, "Like Luther, Calvin adopted the general tenets of traditional Augustinian eschatology." [p. 38]. He is a preterist meaning he believes that Revelation "teaches that many if not most of the prophecies within the book pointed to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70." [p. 140].

Mathison's hermeneutic for interpreting the Old Testament is Jesus Christ [p. 166] but he doesn't explain exactly how that affects his hermeneutic. Since he is a Replacement

theologian and believes the church includes all believers of all time, my assumption is that he reinterprets the Old Testament with the New Testament.

He refers to premillennialism's "fundamental hermeneutical flaw" to be their understanding that the 1,000 years of Revelation 20:1-6 is a literal time period that is the Messianic Kingdom [p. 176-177].

To conclude this section on the hermeneutics of Eschatology, we are going to examine the history of hermeneutics particularly as it applies to the doctrine of last things.

Interpretive results under an allegorical hermeneutic are as varied as the minds of the various interpreters are varied. There is no control beyond the imagination. "Philo did not think that the literal meaning was useless, but it represented the immature level of understanding. The literal sense was the body of Scripture, and the allegorical its soul. Accordingly the literal was for the immature, and the allegorical for the mature. Nor did Philo believe the allegorical method denied the reality of the historical events.... [Philo developed a set of rules for determining when and whether to allegorize a Scripture. Some of them were:] Grammatical peculiarities are hints that underneath the record is a deeper spiritual truth. Stylistic elements of the passage (synonyms, repetition, etc.) indicate that deeper truth is present. Manipulation of punctuation, words, meanings of words, and new combinations of words can be so done as to extract new and deeper truth from the passage. Whenever symbols are present, we are to understand them figuratively and not literally. Spiritual truth may be obtained from etymologies of names. We have the law of double-application. Many natural objects signify spiritual things (heaven means the mind; earth means sensation; a field [means] revolt, etc." [Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 27-28]. Philo may have claimed that he believed Scriptures had a literal meaning, but in practice there was no verse in the Bible that could not be allegorized. These rules were designed for that purpose, that is, to allow allegorizing any Scripture to which the interpreter decided he wanted to assign a spiritual meaning. "[A]n allegorist believes the average person may be reading and interpreting wrongly without the help of a scholar or, in the case of Scripture, a wise, well-trained theologian. Often, even today, allegorists look down their noses at those who take the Bible at face value with a normal, literal hermeneutic." [Mal Couch, *An Introduction to Evangelical Hermeneutics*, p. 97]. Don't miss the shameless promotion of manipulating the Scriptures to make them say what you want them to say. Every hermeneutical system apart from the literal has to do this. This enthrones and elevates the interpreter to a position superior to the God of the Bible. We simply cannot interpret the Word of God in that manner.

This was the normative hermeneutic through the Middle Ages but it is still with us, particularly in Eschatology. Luther had a difficult time overcoming it to return to using a

literal hermeneutic and concerning Eschatology he didn't succeed. "The Alexandrian method greatly influenced medieval hermeneutics and resulted in the displacement of premillennialism with amillennialism after Augustine. While most of evangelical hermeneutics has abandoned the Alexandrian allegorical method as applied to the narrative portions of Scripture, it is still inconsistently applied to the prophetic portions of the Old Testament, resulting in spiritualized interpretation of such terms as Israel, Jerusalem, and Zion. On a more popular level, many sermons unconsciously reflect the Philonic emphasis on number symbolism and illegitimate interpretations of texts." [Mal Couch, *An Introduction to Evangelical Hermeneutics*, p. 98]. Couch has fallen into the dispensationalist nice guy trap here by suggesting that these allegorical hermeneutics only affect prophecy. Allegorical hermeneutics, when used to interpret prophecy, also affect every other area of Systematic Theology.

Allegorical hermeneutics were not an accident; they did not come about by means of serendipity or well-meaning motives. They were a malevolent attack on the Scriptures. Pentecost wrote, "The allegorical method was not born out of the study of the Scriptures, but rather out of a desire to unite Greek philosophy and the Word of God. It did not come out of a desire to present the truths of the Word, but to pervert them. It was not the child of orthodoxy but of heterodoxy." [J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 23-24]. Couch quotes a man named Trigg who wrote a biography of Origen, "Mr. Allegorism" as he is sometimes called, and he said, "It took no genius to recognize that such allegory was a desperate effort to avoid the plain meaning of the text, and that, indeed, is how Origen viewed it." [Mal Couch, *An Introduction to Evangelical Hermeneutics*, p. 98]. Origen knew what he was doing and what he was doing was a deliberate perversion of the biblical text. Earlier, I read the Orthodox priest Azkoul's statement in which he makes the case that Augustine was not presenting biblical orthodoxy but was instead creating a whole new system of theology that was not Christian, but was instead based on pagan philosophy and was creating a whole new theological creature that was not Christian. The point is, anything less than a literal hermeneutic is a device used by the enemy to subvert the presentation of a faithful, biblical, Christian witness to the truth. Dr. Pentecost used the word "pervert" to describe why and how allegorical hermeneutics came about. "Pervert" means to "alter (something) from its original course, meaning, or state to a distortion or corruption of what was first intended; [to] lead (someone) away from what is considered right, natural, or acceptable." [The Oxford American College Dictionary]. Perversion is done knowingly, willingly, and with malice aforethought. Pagan thought operates in the realm of Satan; therefore, to build doctrine based on pagan thought is to do Satan's bidding.

Origen's impact on Eschatology has been profound and most people don't realize they have been misled by two men, Origen and Augustine, who developed their theology

about 1,500 years ago. "Concerning biblical prophecy, Origen rejected the popular Christian hope of the coming earthly millennial reign of Jesus. As a result, he questioned the authenticity of Revelation, which so clearly speaks of such a millennium, and treated the book symbolically. He wrote, in fact, that Christ's coming in the clouds, as described in Matthew 24:30, referred to the Lord's coming into the souls of the openhearted when they accepted the basic truths of doctrine. In Origen's thinking, 'His [Christ's second] coming' occurred when the mature Christian found Jesus in the hidden meanings of Scripture." [Mal Couch, *An Introduction to Evangelical Hermeneutics*, p. 99]. Is this not the very same doctrine as the modern, amillennial explanation of Christ's Kingdom which is said to be happening now with Christ ruling in every believer's heart?

Many of the early church fathers became anti-Semitic early in church history and Origen was no exception. This led to Replacement Theology. "[H]e is scornful towards those millenarians who, in his opinion, interpret the scriptural prophecies of the eschatological Jerusalem 'in a Jewish sense,' by taking them to imply an extended period of idealized earthly beatitude. Clearly the most important part of the Church's traditional images of the future, for Origen, is what they can tell us, in a symbolic way, about the individual Christian's growth towards salvation." [Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology*, p. 49].

Not everyone in the early church followed Origen and Augustine in adopting allegorical hermeneutics. Tertullian (ca.160-225) in the west North Africa city of Carthage (the Tunis area of Tunisia today), John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407) preached in Constantinople, and Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350-428) labored in Antioch and the surrounding area and all of them utilized a more literal hermeneutic. They were not without their interpretive, theological faults but they did not adopt allegorical hermeneutics. The men of Antioch were consistently more faithful in this regard than those in Alexandria. Alexandria, in northern Egypt, was right in between the Carthage on the west and Antioch on the east.

"Theodore has been rightly called 'the prince of ancient exegetes.' He opposed the allegorical system of interpretation and insisted on a thorough understanding of the grammar of the text and the historical background of the text in order to discover the meaning of the writer. He also gave careful attention to the text in its immediate and its more remote contexts. This type of study made him an able commentator and theologian.... Both he and Chrysostom had a healthy influence on the interpretation of the Bible in their day. Their work was a marked contrast to the strained interpretations of Scripture that resulted from the use of the allegorical method of interpretation." [Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, p. 135]. "John's [Chrysostom] theology was expressed primarily in his sermons and was neither systematic, precise, nor original. His

sermons drew spiritual and moral applications from a literal and grammatical exegesis of the Scriptures...” [“Chrysostom, John in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 246].

“Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia in the early second century, apparently also had had close contact with the community in which the Johannine writings were produced. He is known to have collected material about Jesus and his disciples from oral sources, and to have arranged it in five books entitled *Explanations of the Word of the Lord*. According to Irenaeus, book 4 of Papias’ collection contained, among teachings attributed to Jesus, a vivid description of a coming millennial kingdom, in which the fruitfulness of the earth will be increased to staggering proportions for the sake of the risen saints. Papias’ authority became the basis of Irenaeus’ own millennial expectations at the end of the second century; Eusebius, however, found Papias’ millenarianism proof of his ‘very small intelligence.’” [Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology*, p. 18].

Papias lived from about 60-130 A.D. This means he had access to people in Ephesus who heard the apostle John. What he heard from them are the things he put into his book that Irenaeus learned. It is very unfortunate that all we know about Papias we know from Irenaeus. Papias’ book has been lost to history.

“...Irenaeus goes on, in his apologetic for the future of the material cosmos, to defend the millenarian hope represented by Papias and the ‘elders’ of earlier Asiatic Christianity. Here he presents a prospect of human resurrection in two stages arguing that ‘it is fitting for the righteous first to receive the promise of the inheritance which God promised the fathers, and to reign in it, when they rise again to behold God in this creation which is renewed, and that the judgment should take place afterwards.’ Irenaeus supports this interpretation by referring to many biblical passages that promise salvation to Israel in typical terms of peace, prosperity and material restoration, and he insists that these may not be allegorized away. The purpose of such a millennial kingdom, he suggests, is to allow the just time, in the familiar setting of a renewed earth, to become gradually accustomed ‘to partaking of the divine nature.’... At the end of this thousand-year period of preparation, Irenaeus foresees God’s final judgment and retribution in terms of Apoc [Revelation] 20 and 21. All the dead will be raised, the unjust will be cast into the eternal fire of Gehenna, and ‘a new heaven and a new earth’—timeless and incorruptible—will be created as the abode of the just. The physical nature of the saved will be preserved, but transformed into a thing of inconceivable beauty. In accord with Jesus’ promise that the seed of God’s Word, falling on fertile ground, will bear fruit ‘a hundredfold, sixtyfold and thirtyfold,’ Irenaeus foresees different grades of beatitude for the just, according to one’s merit ... Just as the real punishment for sinners will be separation from God—a separation which they have ‘chosen of their own accord’—so the real reward of the just is ‘communion with God,’ ‘receiving God’ as life

and light, and being made anew in God's image. Such a relationship, Irenaeus implies, is neither static nor limited by human finitude: it is part of a history of growth, whose term is participation in the glory which is God's own life." [Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology*, pp. 31-32].

"We would have a different history of interpretation had the method of the Antioch School prevailed. Unfortunately for sound interpretation, the ecclesiasticism of the established church, which depended for its position on the allegorical method, prevailed, and the views of the Antioch School were condemned as heretical." [J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 25]. Dr. Pentecost is referring to the very early doctrine, vigorously promoted and defended by Augustine, that the interpretation of the Bible was what the church said it was. The allegorical hermeneutic became the norm in the church despite the literal outpost at Antioch and as the church solidified its power in Rome, they destroyed any opposition in the form of literal hermeneutics. It is noteworthy to understand that literal hermeneutics were condemned by the church. Allegorical hermeneutics and amillennial Eschatology became firmly entrenched in church dogma for over 1,000 years. The Anabaptists in Switzerland were tortured and murdered not only by Roman Catholics but by the Reformer Zwingli because they read the Bible and figured out baptism was a rite for believers and not for babies. There were other issues as well but infant baptism was the most significant and all the conclusions they reached were based on literal hermeneutics. Understanding the Bible by reading it according to literal hermeneutics cost these men and women their lives. That was only five hundred years ago.